

ate, compare Sisyphus' wealth<sup>31</sup> with that  
re, that you have a royal bride and father-in-law,  
can be an ingrate—this is all owed to me.  
but what good does it do to foretell their  
e the threats with which my anger is pregnant.  
shall follow. Perhaps I'll regret my actions.  
t having protected a traitorous husband.  
if the god that now stokes my heart.  
ething truly momentous is stirring in my soul.

# PALAEPHATUS

(perhaps 4th or 3rd c. BC, wrote in Greek)

*Palaeophatus—the name might be a pseudonym—is a shadowy figure about whom everything is uncertain. One possible scenario is this: He lived sometime in the 3rd century BC and wrote On Unbelievable Things (Peri Apiston) in five books. These were later summarized in the epitome (abridged version) we currently have. Palaeophatus' work is an excellent example of mythological rationalization, an ancient method of interpretation that attempts to see in myths mere erroneous accounts of situations that were originally ordinary events with rational explanations. Most often for Palaeophatus the transformation of something ordinary into the extraordinary is due to misunderstanding of one sort or another. Language, in particular, is liable in his mind to give rise to later interpretations made out of context. For instance, the hero Bellerophon did not ride a winged horse Pegasus, but captained a ship called Pegasos. Although this approach sometimes produces absurd results—more absurd, in fact, than the myths themselves—it is one that was clearly at work in the thinking of many other Greek writers. It should be also noted that dim reflections of rationalization are at the heart of many more modern approaches to myth.*

## FROM ON UNBELIEVABLE THINGS

### Prologue

I have written this work about unbelievable things because gullible people, unacquainted with wisdom and scientific knowledge, believe everything they are told, while those who are naturally more intelligent and analytical disbelieve that any of these things happened at all. I think that all the stories happened since names do not appear in isolation without any story behind them. No, first there was the reality, then accordingly the story about it. Whatever physical shapes and forms are said to have actually existed in the past but that do not exist now—such things never existed, for anything that has ever come into existence at any time both exists now and will exist in the future. I, at any rate, am constantly commending the writers Melissos and Lamiscos of Samos for saying, "What came into existence in the beginning exists and so will exist." The poets and chroniclers distorted certain events into something more incredible and astonishing so that people would be thrilled. I recognize that such things cannot happen as they are described, but I have also grasped this separate fact: if they had not happened at all, they would not have been turned into stories. I went to numerous lands and asked the old people what they had been told about each of the stories. I am writing what I learned from them. I personally

saw what each of the locations is like today, and I have written these accounts not as they had been told to me, but after I visited and investigated them in person.

### 1 The Centaurs

They say that the Centaurs were beasts that had the overall form of a horse except for the head, which was that of a man's. Now, in case anyone believes such a beast existed, it is an impossibility. The natures of horse and man are not at all harmonious, their food is not the same, and it is not possible for a horse's food to pass through a human mouth and throat. Besides, if there had been such a form then, it would also exist now.

The truth of the matter is this. When Ixion ruled Thessaly, a herd of bulls had gone wild on Mount Pelion, rendering the rest of the mountain range impassable as well. The bulls came down into the inhabited regions and devastated the orchards and crops along with the beasts of burden. So Ixion proclaimed that if anyone destroyed the bulls, he would give him a lot of money. Some young men from a village in the foothills called Nephelē ("Cloud") came up with the idea of training horses for riding (previously people had not understood how to ride on horseback; they just used wagons). So they mounted their riding horses and set off for where the bulls were. They attacked the herd using javelins. When they were chased by the bulls, the young men would pull back a little, for their horses were more fleet-footed than the bulls. And when the bulls stopped chasing, the men would turn around and throw their javelins. In this way they destroyed them. From that the Centaurs {*Kentauroi*} got their name since they had shot {*kentannumi*} down the bulls {*tauroi*}. It has nothing to do with the form of the bulls, for there is nothing bull-like about the Centaurs. They are shaped like horses and humans. So they took their name from their deed.

Now, the Centaurs got their money from Ixion and prided themselves on what they had done and on their wealth. They grew arrogant and committed many base acts, even against Ixion himself, who lived in the city that is now called Larissa (at the time those who lived there were called Lapiths). When the Lapiths invited them to a feast, the Centaurs got drunk and kidnapped their womenfolk. Loading them up onto their horses, they rode off to their own village. After that they attacked the Lapiths and made war upon them. They would descend during the night to the plains and set ambushes. When day came, they would burn and pillage and then run off to the mountains. While they were heading off like this, those looking at them from behind and from far away could only see the backs of the horses, not their heads, and the upper part of the men, not their legs. Seeing this strange sight, they said, "The Centaurs from Nephelē are overrunning us!" From this image and saying there was fashioned the unbelievable myth, that a horse-man was born from the cloud {*nephelē*} on the mountain.

### 2 Pasiphae

A myth is told about Pasiphae that she fell in love with a grazing bull, that Daedalus made a wooden cow and enclosed Pasiphae in it, and in this way the bull mounted and mated with the woman. It is said that she became pregnant and gave birth to a

son with a man's body and a horse's head. It is not possible for one animal to make a child that matches the male's genitals. A hyena to mate with each other are of different species. Even if they were to produce young, I doubt it. In the first place, for all four-legged animals, they do not mate by mounting with it and only then by mounting her. A woman could not do this.

The truth of the matter is that Pasiphae was being treated by Procris, a woman from Cephallenia, who was working for Minos. His name was Procris, and he persuaded him to sleep with her. From the time he had had this child, he did not believe it to be his because he had not seen her. He ordered that the child was Tauros, a bull. He named him a brother to his own children, so that he could be a servant.

When the boy became a man, Minos learned of this, he gave him a sword and a bull's head. He came willingly, he was to be bound. The young man learned to hunt. He stole livestock and in the process he was caught. In his company to capture him, but the young man lived in it the rest of his life. They say that by feeding on them. Whenever he sent him to this one shut up in a cage. When Minos captured his enemy, Ariadne, however, sent a sword and a bull's head. "Minotaur" with it. <...> So they formed it into the myth.

### 4 The Cadmeian Sphinx

It is told of the Cadmeian Sphinx and her face, a bird's wings, and a human body. She gave a riddle to each of the citizens, and whoever solved the riddle, she killed herself. It is an unbelievable and impossible story, and it is infantile that they were eaten up.

<sup>1</sup> Though we cannot be certain, it is likely that the puppy and the javelin <that she later gave> Hyginus 189.

to carry Bellerophon's. I do not think  
 for all birds' wings in the world, for if  
 now. They also say that Bellerophon's  
 ra was "in front a lion, in back a ser-  
 pent, a beast existed, only with three heads  
 a lion, and a goat to digest the same  
 fire is silly. And which of the heads

ites was a Corinthian gentleman who  
 around making raids and plundering  
 s *Pegasos*. In the same way even now  
 name more likely to be given to a ship  
 e river Xanthos on a high mountain  
 o approaches to this mountain, one  
 Xanthians and one from behind that  
 h, and in the middle of them there is  
 forth. The name of this mountain is  
 o live in the area, there was a lion liv-  
 g along the rear, and these terrorized  
 Bellerophon's arrived. He set fire to  
 destroyed the beasts. So the people of  
*Pegasos* and destroyed Amisodaros'  
 sed on it.

a foretold to him that his father was  
 bbed his sister and climbed onto the  
 iuxine Sea after traveling for three or  
 am faster than a ship can sail. And it  
 water for itself and for them to boot  
 a time without nourishment)! Then  
 old him how to save himself and had  
 ce and gave it as bride-price to Aietes  
 parts). You can see that animal skins  
 as bride-price for his own daughter!  
 ething? To avoid this ridiculous con-  
 olden." Even if the skin were golden,  
 it from some foreigner.

os the horse was supposed to have been so

It has also been said that Jason readied the *Argo* and recruited the heroes of Greece  
 for an expedition to get this fleece. But Phrixos would not have been so ungrateful as  
 to kill his benefactor, nor would the *Argo*, even if the fleece were made of emeralds,  
 have sailed after it.

The truth of the matter is this. Athamas son of Aiolos (who was the son of  
 Hellen) ruled Phthia. He had a man whom he entrusted with his finances and his  
 authority, a man whom he considered extraordinarily trustworthy and valuable. His  
 name was Crios {"Ram"}. After Phrixos' mother died, Athamas made Phrixos heir to  
 the kingdom because he was the eldest. . . . Learning of this, Crios said nothing  
 to Athamas, but did speak to Phrixos, urging him to leave the land. Crios personally  
 equipped a ship and loaded onto it whatever Athamas had that was of value. He  
 filled the ship full with all possible treasures and money. Among these was a statue.  
 Merops' mother (her name was Cos {"Fleece"}), a daughter of Helios, had commis-  
 sioned a statue of herself—life-sized and made of gold that she herself owned. There  
 was a lot of gold in the statue and it was a big topic of conversation. Crios put these  
 things on board the ship, along with Phrixos and Helle, then departed and got away.  
 Now Helle fell sick during the voyage and died (and the sea is called the Hellespont  
 after her), but they made it to Phasis and settled there. Phrixos married the daughter  
 of Aietes, the king of the Colchians, and gave him the golden statue of Cos as bride-  
 price. Later, after Athamas was dead, Jason sailed on the *Argo* to get the gold of Cos  
 {"Fleece"}—not a ram's skin. That is the truth.

### 32 The Amazons

I have this to say about the Amazons: these women warriors were not women, but  
 barbarian men who used to wear full-length tunics (like Thracian women), put their  
 hair up in headbands, and shave their beards (like the <name of a foreign people  
 missing> do even today). Because of this they were called women by their enemies,  
 but the Amazons were, as a nation, good at fighting battles. There probably never  
 was an army of women, for there are none anywhere now.

### 33 Orpheus

The myth about Orpheus is also false, that four-legged animals, crawling things,  
 birds, and trees followed him when he played his cithara. I think this is what it was.  
 Some raving Bacchai tore up some sheep on Mount Pieria. They would do many  
 other things in their violent state and then go to the mountain and spend their days  
 there. While they were staying there, the townsmen, afraid for their wives and  
 daughters, sent for Orpheus and asked him to think of some way he could bring  
 them down from the mountain. He offered sacrifices to Dionysos and led the fren-  
 zied women down by playing the cithara. The women came down the mountain

<sup>7</sup> Something is obviously missing from the text here and the sentence preceding this gap may well also be  
 damaged. If we fill in the gap with the usual account, Athamas remarries, and his new wife, Ino, plots the  
 death of Phrixos and Helle so that her own children will inherit the kingdom.

holding for the first time fennel stalks and branches from all sorts of trees. The pieces of wood seemed a miracle to the men who saw them on that occasion, and they said, "Orpheus even brings the forest down from the mountain with his cithara playing!" From this the myth was formed.

### 34 Pandora

The story about Pandora, that she was fashioned from earth and then passed along her physical form to others, is intolerable. I do not think this happened. Rather, Pandora was a Greek woman of very great wealth. Whenever she would go out, she would make herself up and rub herself with a lot of white earth.<sup>8</sup> She was the first woman to discover how to color one's skin by using a large quantity of white earth as many women do nowadays. In fact, none of them is singled out today because most do it. That is what really happened, but the story took a turn toward the impossible.

### 38 The Hydra

It is also said of the Lernaian Hydra that it was a snake with fifty heads but one body. And when Heracles removed one of its heads, two would grow back. A crab supposedly also came to the aid of the Hydra. Then Iolaos helped Heracles because the crab was helping the Hydra. If anyone believes any of this happened, he is a fool. It is ridiculous at first glance. How is it, when he cut off one head, that did he not suffer from the rest of them and get eaten?

It was like this. Lernos was king of a certain place, and the place had in fact gotten its name from him. Today the spot is in Argive territory, but everyone back then lived in separate villages. So Argos, Mycenae, Tiryns, and Lerna were independent cities at the time, and a king was in charge of each of them. Now, the other kings were subordinate to Eurystheus, the son of Sthenelos and the grandson of Perseus, because he controlled the greatest and most populous of these places, Mycenae. But Lernos did not wish to remain his subordinate, so he therefore went to war against him.

At one of the approaches to his territory Lernos had a sturdy little fort that was garrisoned by fifty elite archers who manned the tower night and day without break. The name of the fort was Hydra {"Water-Snake"}. Now, Eurystheus sent Heracles to sack the fort. Heracles' troops tried to set fire to the archers on the tower, and whenever one of them would get hit with the fire and fall, two regular archers would rise up in place of the one (because the man who had just been killed was one of the elite ones). When Lernos was hard-pressed by Heracles in the war, he hired some mercenaries from Caria. A great warrior, Carcinus {"Crab"} by name, came and brought his troops to him, and with Carcinus' help, Lernos held off Heracles. Then Iolaos son of Iphicles (Iolaos was Heracles' nephew) helped Heracles by bringing some troops from Thebes. He came to Hydra and set fire to the tower. With the help of this force Heracles

<sup>8</sup> The Greek simply says "earth" here, but it very likely refers to ceruse, or white lead, which was (and still is) employed as a paint pigment and was used before modern times to whiten the skin.

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pened.

### 39 Ce

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### 40 Alce

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said, "Alce  
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somewher  
arrived the  
sidered his

<sup>9</sup> See Palaeph

<sup>10</sup> A cave the